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'Shocked' Israelis Investigate Charges by U.S. of Espionage

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JERUSALEM, Nov. 24 — Israeli officials said today that the Government was investigating whether its intelligence agents had spied on the United States, but they said the country's top political leaders had no prior knowledge of such operations.

The statement followed the arrest Thursday of Jonathan Jay Pollard, 31 years old, a civilian employee of the Naval Intelligence Service in Suitland, Md., who has been accused of selling classified code information to Israel over the past 18 months. He was taken into custody near the Israeli Embassy in Washington.

In its first detailed statement since the arrest, the Foreign Ministry today did not rule out the possibility that an Israeli intelligence agency might have been involved in spying on the United States.

Israeli Government officials, who declined to allow themselves be identified because of the sensitivity of the case, said first indications were that someone in the Israeli intelligence community, acting on his own initiative, might have undertaken a spying operation in contravention of Government policy and never informed the country's political leaders.

Israeli Cabinet ministers were described by their aides today as "shocked" and "dazed" by the allegations of spying and the potential repercussions for American-Israeli relations.

"It is something very, very unpleasant," one Israeli official said of the affair. "We have to find out who goofed. On Friday the politicians were taking it lightly. They could not believe such a thing. On Saturday they began to digest

what had happened and the possible implications for relations with the United States. Today, I would not be lying if I said some people are close to panic."

The Pollard case, said a political commentator, Ze'ev Chafetz, "could turn out to be a real political hot potato. Everyone already wants to know who gave the orders. How much did Peres know? How much did Shamir know? This could bring down the Government."

After three days of saying that it had no knowledge of Mr. Pollard and was looking into the matter, the Foreign Ministry said today:

"Israel's political leadership received with shock and consternation the reports from Washington according to which an employee of the U.S. Navy was accused of espionage for Israel.

"Actions of this kind in the United States stand in total contradiction to

the policy of the Israeli Government. It is Israel's policy to refrain from any intelligence activity related to the United States, in view of the close and special relations of friendship prevailing between the two countries.

"A thorough examination is being undertaken to determine whether there has been a deviation of any kind from this policy. Should such a deviation be found to have occurred then necessary conclusions will be drawn."

The statement was released after meetings this morning between Prime Minister Shimon Peres, Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir.

No Details on Investigation

Officials here declined to say how the investigation was being carried out, who was leading it or when it might be completed.

Some American Jewish groups represented in Israel said tonight that they were uncomfortable with the time it has taken the Israeli Government to produce a clear response to the case.

"Israel should deal with this matter directly, without further delay and at the highest level," said Harry Wall, the Israel representative of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. "If it is true, it is an act of incomprehensible stupidity," he said.

The foreign arm of Israeli intelligence, the Mossad, is equivalent to the Central Intelligence Agency in the United States. It has several agents based in the Washington embassy, who are primarily responsible for liaison with American intelligence services.

Mossad Chief and Prime Minister

The chief of the Mossad is not known to the Israeli public. Newspapers are not permitted to print either his name or picture. The current Mossad chief, called simply "No. 1," came into office in September 1982 when his predecessor, Yitzhak Hoffe, stepped down.

Israeli officials suggested that a key question in any investigation would be the extent, if any, of Mossad's connection with the case: If the intelligence service was involved, was it on the initiative of the Mossad chief or lower-level agents?

The chief of the Mossad is part of the Prime Minister's office and reports only to him.

Isser Harel, who was chief of the Mossad until he resigned in 1983, was asked by the newspaper Haaretz whether it would be possible for espionage activity to have taken place out of the Washington embassy without high-level directives from Jerusalem.

"Theoretically this is possible, even though as a rule activity such as this is not carried out without directives from above," Mr. Harel said.

Mr. Pollard worked for two years in a special Navy intelligence unit dealing with antiterrorism, according to United States Navy officials. After his arrest he told the authorities that he had been paid about \$50,000 for turning over confidential documents, Federal officials said.

The day after Mr. Pollard's arrest, agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation arrested his wife, Anne L. Henderson-Pollard, and charged her with unauthorized possession of classified documents.